

Quick Facts

About... Group B Streptococcus Disease

What is Group B Streptococcus disease?

Group B Streptococcus (GBS) bacteria can cause illness in newborn babies, pregnant women, the elderly, and adults with other illnesses such as diabetes and liver disease. Although now rare, GBS is still the most common cause of life-threatening infection in newborns. About 25 percent of pregnant women carry GBS in their rectum or vagina, and most of these women have no signs of illness.

What are the signs of being sick with this disease?

- Newborn illness - symptoms for GBS in newborns may include fever, difficulty feeding, fussiness, tiredness, or difficulty waking up. These symptoms may be similar to symptoms of other illnesses.
- Adult illness - GBS infections can cause mild disease, such as urinary tract infections. More serious disease in adults may include blood infections and bone and joint infections. Very rarely, GBS may cause meningitis (swelling of the lining of the brain) in adults.

How is GBS spread?

- Newborns are infected by the mother just before or during the birth process.
- Spread of GBS bacteria in non-pregnant adults and older infants (more than one week old) is not clearly understood.

How is GBS disease diagnosed?

See your health care provider right away if you think you may have GBS infection. Your health care provider may take samples of body fluids, such as blood or spinal fluid, to determine if GBS bacteria are present. These cultures take a few days to grow.

How is the disease treated?

GBS infections in newborns and adults are usually treated with antibiotics. Sometimes, soft tissue or bone infections require surgery. Treatment depends on the kind of infection the bacteria cause. Your health care provider can recommend specific treatment options.

Who is at highest risk for getting the disease?

- Newborns: The risk is high for infants born to women who are infected. The risk of infection is also slightly higher in newborns who are born prematurely.
- Adults: The risk is greatest for persons with chronic disease, such as diabetes, liver failure, and history of stroke or cancer. Rates of disease are also higher among African Americans and the elderly (especially if living in a nursing home or confined to bed).

Can GBS disease be prevented?

- Newborn prevention: Pregnant women should be tested for GBS between 35-37 weeks of every pregnancy. If the test is positive, the disease can be prevented in newborns by giving pregnant women antibiotics through the vein during labor.
- Adult prevention: Standard infection control practices, especially for patients who are hospitalized or in nursing homes, will reduce the risk of transmission of all bacterial infections, including GBS.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent this disease?

No vaccine is currently available to prevent GBS infections.

For additional information on Group B Streptococcus disease, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at: <http://www.cdc.gov/groupbstrep/>

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